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ABSTRACT

The author believes the machinery of accreditation has outlived its usefulness. This paper examines the effects of present accrediting activities and the work of regional associations and professional societies on part-time and continuing education. Part-time and continuing education has long been discouraged by the prestigious universities, though the notion of full-time faculty, full-time students, and the community of scholars has in actuality become a myth. Yet these myths are being perpetuated by accrediting teams who have encouraged practices directed against continuing education. Accrediting groups have pressed for greater emphasis on standardized tests for admission, increased efforts at recruitment, broader geographic representation and more financial aid, all aimed at admission and retention of the full-time student. The Commissioner of Education in New York State has proposed the "external degree" which, if accepted, would provide much of the flexibility needed to respond to today's problems and to the demands that our society is making on higher education. Voluntary agencies do not have the authority, nor can they respond quickly enough to the crises faced by higher education, and there is great need for regulation of the educational enterprise by a new administrative agency of the federal government. (AF)

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ACCREDITATION OR ACCOUNTABILITY: MUST WE CHOOSE?

The Middle States Association of
Collegiate Registrars and Officers of Admission

Lloyd H. Elliott
December 1, 1970

We hear a great deal about the "communications gap." Sometimes that gap is widest when we delude ourselves. A candidate for office was making a canvass of his constituents. He sent out a zealous interviewer who went from door to door soliciting opinions about the candidate. At one door the interviewer got the following opinion, "I wouldn't vote for him if he was the last man on earth." After the door was slammed in his face the interviewer opened his notebook and wrote "doubtful."

I shall not try to be coy about my message today. I believe that our machinery of accreditation has outlived its usefulness, that voluntary efforts are helpless in the face of today's problems, that neither the society nor the student is being protected from third-rate programs, and that this very same accreditation machinery is now working to prevent flexibility and innovation rather than to encourage new approaches. This not-so-subtle statement is made now so that my opinion, prejudice or bias -- call it what you will -- is clear from the start.

Having taken myself from the "doubtful" column, let me illustrate the problems and limitations of present accrediting activities, the work of regional associations and of professional societies by examining their effects on part-time and continuing education. In selecting this area of educational endeavor I make no claim that it is the most important, least important or unimportant. It is chosen as an illustration.

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For several years now many educators have taken the position that continuing education is the ladder of individual success, that it is the means to political maturity, that through continuing education developing nations may pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, that people may extend learning and satisfaction into senior years, and even that continuing education is the hope of the world. Yet we have behaved as though continuing education were a second-rate experience and that students who don't fit into traditional educational slots were rather suspect. If not stupid, they were thought to be abnormal in other ways. If such students attended institutions where continuing education was accepted as important, their institutions were assigned second-rate status -- that is, second in rating to institutions that neither encouraged nor permitted such aberrations to the sanctity of full-time study for the full-time student under full-time supervision of a full-time faculty.

Many of the prestige institutions of the country have gone to great lengths to discourage part-time and/or continuing education. Their students have been required to devote full time to the pursuit of formal degrees, while the full-time faculty has been devoting less and less time to teaching them. Research, exploration, consulting, professional activities, and many related matters have often combined to limit the professor to fewer and fewer personal contacts with students. While this has been happening, what, may I ask, have the

accrediting agencies been doing? Their policies have helped assign continuing education to second place and all too often have helped to remove the professor from the classroom.

Experiences of recent years have shown us that "full-time" faculty isn't a very practical definition and "full-time" student is certainly a questionable premise. Some years ago when a distinguished alumnus told me that any student who really wants to can spend 20 to 40 hours each week in activities apart from the academic program, I was too naive to believe him. I've been proven wrong by campus politics, community action, student work programs, football and a host of other outlets.

The community of scholars so eloquently defended for so many years by accrediting groups has not broken down -- it never really existed in the first place. We have tried to build an academic community in the private New England prep schools and to continue that community at the college level by sending students prepared in those schools to the Ivy League colleges. To their everlasting credit, such schools and colleges broke up their elitist fiefdoms a few years ago, and in so doing broke up the closest thing we have ever known to an academic community. Those who have succumbed to the nostalgic myth of "community" are most often reliving the glow of fraternity fellowship or the togetherness of the athletic team. They have no knowledge of urban education -- the diversity of age, religion, race, sex, politics, and economics and the competition of the subway and traffic jam.

After four to eight years of undergraduate and graduate study, most students are able to look back on, at most, two or three or a half-dozen professors with whom they were able to build a mutually enriching relationship. During the same period they may have strengthened common interests with a handful of other students that may lead to life-long associations. In spite of questions of relevance, communication or depersonalization, the so-called community formal education is not likely to change. The truth remains that individual initiative, individual study, and individual effort are the means by which a student advances his own education. While both students and professors can be quite ambivalent from moment to moment, the good teacher must be good for each succeeding class and the good student must proceed to his next task and to his next teacher. We are therefore wrong when we insist that an artificial and often superficial community of scholars be created. Even if it could prevail, it would replace individual motivation as the driving force behind the best of teaching and the best of student achievement. Such a shift of human behavior is too much to expect.

These and other fallacies aided and abetted by accrediting teams have encouraged practices directed against continuing education, both part-time and full-time. At the undergraduate level preference is given to the applicant who wants to study in residence full time, ostensibly from nine to five. The same applicant is given first priority in competition for whatever financial aid is available.

Even public institutions must make continuing education pay its way while everything else benefits from the tax subsidies. Like conditions prevail at the graduate level and, if we do anything, we leave continuing education to others -- to other institutions or to other units of the university which we then treat like unwanted step-children.

But changes do come, and we have created a new institution which, among other services, provides for continuing education in a greater measure than most established colleges and universities. I refer, of course, to the community college. A few older institutions have offered varied programs of part-time and continuing education for many years, but the struggle to gain acceptance and respectability has been an uphill battle.

Accrediting groups -- regional associations, professional societies and gr duate panels -- reflecting the academic opinions of their members, have pressed for greater emphasis on standardized tests for admission, increased efforts at recruitment, broader geographic representation and more scholarship and fellowship aid -- all of which are aimed at the admission and retention of the full-time student. Such pressures have been so great that almost all law schools have been forced to close their evening divisions and part-time graduate programs in education, business administration and engineering are under constant attack. The Ph.D., if achieved through part-time study, may have substance, but it is entirely lacking in academic snob appeal.

Were this not so serious, it would be amusing.

To paraphrase the report of a professional or regional accrediting group to a university president these days, I can vividly remember the following routine:

"Mr. President (begins the Chairman of the visiting Committee, while the other members perch to join in the ceremonial pecking at the awaited signal),

"Your School of Rhetorical Pollution is a good school . . . Let me allay any concerns right here and now about its continued accreditation. We had no doubts about the matter even before we came . . . That, incidentally, was their only reason for coming . . . The faculty is young, vigorous and dedicated. We found the students to be above average -- they're a little rambunctious, but (with a knowing snicker) all students are like that these days -- and the facilities are adequate . . .

"But (the spokesman carefully proceeds) . . . you don't want just an accredited school. This university should have a truly distinguished School of Rhetorical Pollution. (The gravity of the situation is now apparent.) And we (being the experts that we are) have taken time (valuable time of obviously important people) to spend a few days on your campus in order that you could have the benefit of <u>our</u> advice . . . Our recommendations are few . . . you should provide some means for bringing to <u>your</u> (everything is the President's -- it makes him feel so much more important -- and responsible -- and helpless) to your faculty each year two or three <u>really</u> distinguished visiting scholars (maybe like members of the accrediting team) . . . . Now such

men will cost money -- but their presence on the faculty will be well worth it . . . and you simply must get more money for fellowships for graduate students (their number has doubled in the last twelve months and amounts increased by fifty percent). There are so many deserving ones who need to finish that RPD -- Doctor of Rhetorical Pollution -- and more money is needed to support the research interests of the faculty . . . And while your new facilities have been well received by both students and faculty (the five million dollar addition was opened only two years ago), you obviously don't believe that constitutes a satisfying home for the most prestigious school in the university.

"And that leads me to the final recommendation . . . We know of your commitment to the evening programs (the word has gotten around) . . . but, Mr. President, no truly distinguished School of Rhetorical Pollution is today operating an evening program." (The President must now accept full responsibility for all the shortcomings and wrong turns of the institution's first 150 years and throw himself on the mercy of the team or throw an academic temper tantrum, or throw himself off the nearest bridge.)

I have served on several visitation teams for regional associations. My experience has included the North Central, the New England and the Middle States. In twelve years as a university president I have been visited by the engineers, chemists, lawyers,

doctors, librarians, psychologists, teachers, finance officers, foresters, wildlife experts, home economists, nurses, graduate deans, philosophers and dental hygienists -- among many others -- and, with few exceptions, the script has been the same. Is it any wonder that it has been necessary to create the community college -- a new institution with enough flexibility to respond to society's needs for part-time and continuing education!

But things are changing. The Commissioner of Education in New York State has now proposed an "external degree." The influential and distinguished Board of Regents of that State has endorsed the proposal with considerable enthusiasm. In doing so, some of the Regents have pointed out that such a degree, which may be earned through a series of tests, weekend seminars, independent study, correspondence courses and other means, offers the greatest opportunity to make education available to working adults, minority group members and others generally unreached by the practices of colleges and universities which I have described.

American higher education has long prided itself on its diversity. However, flexibility has been found wanting in this sea of diversity. Such a development as the "external degree," if accepted by diverse institutions, would provide much of the flexibility required today if higher education is to respond to the ongoing requirements of our society. Universities, while being called upon to change, will not

really change unless that which they have to offer is made available to more citizens who may use it to their individual advantage as well as for the good of society. But programs which make a university's offerings available to the broader community are met with other barriers. Let me illustrate. At my home institution -- George Washington University -- the College of General Studies is the unit which is the vehicle for offering courses and programs to the greater community. The Middle States Association's visiting team had some serious questions about these efforts. I read from the team's report of February 1967: "The University must decide what the place of the College of General Studies is to be and whether in fact the University can afford the dissipation of its energies represented by the maintenance, supervision and staffing of the many small centers of instruction which together form the College. Strength tends to come from a focusing of effort and the University is not focusing its efforts when the College maintains its many centers."

Interpretation of the above quotation is not necessary. Unfortunately, it speaks for itself, but I cannot resist repeating its obvious and devastating thrust: namely, stretching or even extending institutional efforts to reach people with teaching programs is weakening; while focusing on a narrow objective, organizing for a limited goal brings distinction. Here again the stereotype of distinction has emerged. We want faculty members

who teach less, are paid better and whose research in highly specialized areas is well financed. Of all the criticisms leveled at higher education in recent years, this is one of the most fundamental. Yet, accrediting agencies have followed an almost universal philosophy over the past forty years in recommending increasing narrowness and increasing exclusion as the paths to academic leadership.

In fact we are witnessing the end of an era. We in the universities have spread the belief for half a century that all monies made available for educational endeavors could and would be wisely spent. It was something of an intellectual sin not to overspend our budgets and then return for still greater sums with the explanation, "See, you didn't give us enough . . ." We have again demonstrated our ingenuity by using up all available resources, and we now want to unveil still another proposal, more grandiose, more esoteric and more costly than anything ever before put together. Many an academician has embraced the cliche -- "Our budget should be bound only by the limits of our imagination."

This arrogance and this lack of understanding of other priorities in our society are matters which have been consistently pushed by visiting teams. The bubble may not have burst but the noise we hear comes from the holes punched in the balloon by congressional committees, state legislatures, students who are objecting to further increases in tuition and alumni who want to know why all communications from alma mater are pleas for money.

Let me illustrate still another hang-up. For many years we have conveniently classified the university's basic programs into instruction, research and community service. The community has been defined as the world, the nation, the state or the local area. While many institutions have developed broad programs of community service which are indeed in the public interest, we have moved and been moved to compartmentalize our activities and restrict access to them in such fashion as to greatly reduce their impact. Our own internal inconsistency has effectively refuted our external rhetoric. With help such as that now being given by the Commissioner of New York and the Regents of that state, colleges and universities should be able to assess much more realistically their own roles in raising the level of understanding among their total constituencies -- that is, students of all ages -- and in their contribution toward developing for society leaders of all ages.

But colleges and universities continue to be reprimanded for responding to service needs. Narrowly trained specialists want narrowly focused beams of light rather than general illumination, and such has been the major thrust of accreditation for many years.

Accrediting agencies are not alone to blame for restricting flexibility. Government policy in recent years has also militated against continuing education. I refer to the syndrome of the federal grant university. For more than a quarter of a century now, prestige in higher education has been achieved by the magic wand of large

federal research installations accommodated under the umbrella of a distinguished university. Programs in continuing education have received too little money, too little time, and too little attention from the policy-making agencies of Government or from the Congress. Appropriations for training are encumbered with so much red tape that an individual must be a full-time genius in order to continue his education through part-time study. Administrators of these programs are confronted with all sorts of barriers as they try to spend the available funds, and agency heads have learned that these parts of their budgets are low on the priorities of congressional committees.

There is hope on the horizon, however. I am encouraged by the degree of acceptance of the College-Level Examination Program. As you know, this effort includes tests of general information as well as examinations in individual subjects. If we in the schools and colleges will accept the recommendation recently made to the CEEB that students be allowed to use these tests "in lieu of grades and, where legally possible, in lieu of school attendance," then real progress will be made. This is a practical way to make possible the earning of "external degrees" in the spirit of the suggestion from New York State. With it we could move one fundamental step closer to the award of certificates, degrees and the other embellishments of formal education based on achievement and performance instead of admissions barriers followed by rigid rules of time-serving.

In fact, we can foresee the development wherein "performance" could replace "time served" as the chief hurdle to the award of diplomas. With that, formal attendance in educational institutions would be placed in its proper perspective.

But these and other needed changes in education will be delayed even further unless the limitations of our system of voluntary accreditation are removed.

Having criticized accrediting agencies and associations, it may be difficult for me to convince anyone of the important contribution accreditation has served over the years. Such, however, is my conviction. During the same twelve years mentioned above, I am happy to report that every visitation and every self-study resulted in improvements within the institutions concerned. Why then have I made the above criticisms? In my opinion present means and ends of accreditation are inadequate to the tasks at hand. Regional associations have for several years now simply been unable to keep pace with the swiftly changing educational scene, either at the secondary or higher education levels. Social, political and economic problems occurring at local, state and national levels have often overwhelmed individual high schools, colleges and universities. Regional associations, honor societies, professional groups, and others of this type have been unable to render the kind of help necessary in these crises. They cannot respond quickly enough, they do not have adequate authority, and their methods of response are

inadequate for the job now required. Storefront education, schools without walls, open admission, neighborhood control, busing, community action, politization, disruptions, suspended classes, pass-fail options, degree programs without majors and a host of other matters constitute a new foreign language for those who have come to regard student-teacher ratio, faculty salaries, advancing admissions standards, new classrooms, more money for faculty research, and the number of books in the library as the key problem areas for judging the quality of education. The big questions of education -- racial balance, rights and responsibilities, education for profit, urban crisis and others -- have moved beyond the grasp of voluntary accreditation. With such a dilemma, where then do we go from here?

Because of its vastness, its complexity, and its rapid change, the world of formal education should be regulated by a new administrative agency of the federal government. Only recently the Federal Trade Commission has proposed new guidelines for correspondence schools and private vocational institutions. It may come as a surprise to some to know that the FTC has attempted to protect students in such courses and schools since 1936. But down through the years voluntary accrediting agencies and the Federal Trade Commission haven't been on speaking terms. The proposed new FTC rules would establish tighter standards and would prohibit fraudulent institutions from selling degrees, something which can't be stopped by volunteers. But I am not suggesting that the FTC serve as a model for the federal agency to regulate education.

The immensely complex and diversified educational enterprise in the United States requires more comprehensive attention. With

components private and public, profit and non-profit, entrepreneurial and publicly mandated, highly specialized and quite general, and seemingly all-embracing, still the educational enterprise is, in reality, totally inadequate to the needs of society. Thought of another way, the educational enterprise is in need of nationwide guidelines, codes which can be enforced and contracts which can be made binding. Neither the public nor the student is now protected from misconduct; and recourses to the courts, to boards and to the electorate are all too slow, since the issues are so often camouflaged as to prevent quick decisions.

It is too much to expect that volunteers can provide the measure of public responsibility which is now required. The voice for greater accountability in formal education grows in volume. Men and institutions have not been adequately protected from political interference and intimidation. While the accrediting associations have played a major role in achieving a large measure of academic freedom, they have been unable to protect it in today's educational turmoil. However, the most telling inadequacy of the accrediting machinery is written in the serious erosion of public confidence in formal education. This erosion has deepened in recent years when accrediting work has been the strongest. While I would not blame the accrediting associations for the erosion of public confidence, I maintain that they are inadequate to its restoration which is so necessary.

Where then do we turn?

May I offer a proposal which holds some promise of greatly improving the present situation? I would like to see the establishment of a National Board of Education with powers and duties legislated by the Congress which would include publication of detailed information, both financial and academic, on each college and university in the country. There needs to be a standard reference for such information with regular revisions so that the public may be better informed about higher education. The National Board of Education through its power to allocate or withhold federal funds would also have the power to place institutions on an approved list or to remove them from such a list. The U. S. Office of Education ought to be the instrument through which the proposed National Board of Education administers its programs. The Board would also become the policy making body to the U. S. Office -- a need not now reconcilable by a U. S. Commissioner who has an ill-defined responsibility without protection in the ever swirling political storm. As we know, a major change in educational program now requires three to five years to accomplish and most commissioners fail to stay in office that long. More important, however, the Commissioner and other such administrators in government are so burdened with immediate crises that the formulation of long-rage policy must be pushed down and down on the list of priorities.

For several years now both the assessment of educational efforts and the projection of plans, programs and policies have been the province of presidential commissions, foundation financed studies and

other privately or publicly initiated efforts aimed at the solution of various problems. No major body exists, however, which has the responsibility of translating the results of these ad hoc efforts into policy and, therefore, such reports after circulation to scholars and libraries become dust collectors on the shelf.

Unhappy as I am over the reach of the federal government, which continues to extend that arm to more and more of our activities, the current involvement of some forty government agencies in educational matters makes it all the more necessary that an overall authority -- with authority -- be created. I see a national body such as this Board to be necessary if all of the various aspects of accreditation are to be coordinated to avoid the continued exaggeration of differences as standards are redefined and then applied in various parts of the country or among various accrediting bodies. There may be a place under such a board for the presently functioning accrediting associations and societies. Such a place may be permanent or transitional. I would not wish to predict at this point. The important matter before us now, however, is the two-fold inadequacy of voluntary effort -- an absence of authority in current crises and no provision for the establishment of long range plans. Accreditation without accountability is blind faith and some new authority such as a national policy making body must put the two parts together in such a fashion as to respond to the many urgencies in today's educational arena.

From time to time the creation of such a board has been suggested. We have also witnessed efforts at the establishment of a cabinet-level post for education. I believe a national board with authority legislated by the Congress to formulate and administer broad policies of educational performance, equally able to protect any constituency of education, whether it be students, parents, faculty, administrators or the general public, could bring order out of the chaos now found at every level of education. It could also build on the experience of accrediting bodies without being bound by their limitations.

Lest my remarks be misinterpreted, let me say that I am not proposing to tear down "the establishment." That a serious review of accreditation is now being planned is known to all of us. If these comments today help in any way to speed that review or to broaden its scope, then our time will have been well spent.